

Taking the Plunge Into a Hot Industry

Authors: Darrell Holzer, Field Rep. ATP & Michelle Robinson, Commissioner's Office

Twenty-five year old Ashley Copperwheat may look like any other resident of Great Falls, but Copperwheat is anything but ordinary. Copperwheat, a parts runner for A T Klemens, Inc. *(a large, locally-owned mechanical contractor with a long history of offering apprenticeship opportunities in plumbing, electrical, sheet metal and roofing to workers in North Central Montana)* had no idea that one day she would embark upon a career as a plumber. Having attended college for three years working towards a degree in teaching, somewhere along the way Copperwheat decided, "I just wasn't cut out to be a desk person."



In a very bold move, Copperwheat undertook what some consider a very non-traditional career change. Copperwheat was approached by AT Klemens' apprenticeship coordinator Karen Fried and company president Darrell Anderson who had encouraged her to apply for one of their apprenticeship programs in either roofing, sheet metal, electrical or plumbing. After giving it some thought, she says, "It came down to electrician or plumber and based upon what I had witnessed on the various job sites as a parts runner, I decided I wanted to be a plumber." On

July 10, 2006 Copperwheat took the plunge and was enrolled in the registered plumbing apprenticeship program.

When asked about her long-term career plans, without any hesitation, she exclaimed, "I want to get my Masters license!" Copperwheat also says she's working hard to get into shape to help her meet the physical demands of her newly-chosen vocation. "Its tough work but I'm tough too," she says.

For other women considering a career in non-traditional employment Copperwheat offers the following advice, "If you enjoy working outdoors in a challenging and rewarding profession and seek job security and financial reward, you should consider the opportunities offered in the skilled construction trades. Most importantly,



don't listen to those who would tell you what you can't or shouldn't do – concentrate on what you can do and JUST DO IT!"

Following the completion of Copperwheat's 5-year, 8,500 hour plumbing apprenticeship program she will receive a Certificate of Completion from the Montana Department of Labor & Industry Apprenticeship & Training Program. This certificate is highly recognized and accepted in all 50 states as absolute verification that the holder has met all the necessary qualifications to work as a licensed journey level plumber. As a journeymen plumber, Copperwheat will command a minimum wage of \$23.17 per hour and a potential benefit package that includes health insurance, vacation and retirement benefits.

Nestled between the Pioneer Mountains and the Ruby Range, rests the Dillon residence of ambitious and determined 25 year old Dani Schwarz. Schwarz, a second year electrician apprentice registered with Department Labor & Industry Apprenticeship & Training Program, works for Abacus Electric and is a part-time licensed ferrier.

When asked what made her decide to pursue a career as an electrician, Schwarz replied, "It's kind of funny because I had always been somewhat afraid of electricity". But with the encouragement of her current sponsor, Richard Reyes, and others in the community, not only has she overcome her fear of electricity, but according to Reyes she's quickly developing into a top notch apprentice. "I'd put Dani up against any second year apprentice in the state," claims Reyes.



Ironically, when Reyes first contacted Schwarz about becoming his apprentice, her initial response was, "Gee thanks for asking, but I don't think so." Schwarz says she's never been shy about taking on new challenges, having previously worked as a licensed noxious weed sprayer but her loyalty to her current employer, Pat Thomas of Standard Lumber and Glass Co., caused her to hesitate.

Schwarz was recommended to Reyes by Thomas. Although Thomas didn't want to lose Schwarz as an employee, he knew it would be a great career move for her and there was no denying that she had all the attributes that Reyes was looking for in a new apprentice.

Reyes waited for a more favorable response from Schwarz, but one wasn't forthcoming. Then one night on the way home, Reyes stopped by the local market to pick up some groceries. As he was going into the store he came face-to-face with Schwarz coming out through the same door. Reyes thought he'd give it one more try and said, "So were you

ever going to return my call?” With that she replied, “Yep, I’ll call you tomorrow.” Schwarz went to work for Reyes and Abacus Electric the very next day.

When asked how she deals with the physical demands of the job she replies, “The same way anybody else would – you figure out how to get the job done and then how to get it done right the first time. Richard is an excellent teacher. He not only shows me how it’s done but also takes the time to explain why we do it this way.”



In addition to her on-the-job training, Schwarz must successfully complete related instructional course work, which she says she works on whenever she gets the chance -- “like riding to the next job with Richard.”

For other women considering a career in a traditionally male dominated profession, Schwarz offers the following words of advice, “Don’t pay attention to the nay sayers and don’t limit your opportunities. Stay physically fit and go for it!”

At the conclusion of the 4-year electrical apprenticeship program Schwarz will receive a Certificate of Completion from the Montana Department of Labor & Industry Apprenticeship & Training Program. This certificate is highly recognized and accepted in all 50 states as absolute verification that the holder has met all the necessary qualifications to work as a licensed journey level electrician. As a journeyman electrician, Schwarz will command a minimum wage of \$19.92 per hour and, in most cases, full benefits to include health insurance, vacation and retirement benefits.

In addition to the very attractive wage and benefit levels established for Copperwheat and Schwarz, the personal cost for both women’s training and education will be minimal compared to \$30,000 - \$50,000 debt load after 4 years of college. Copperwheat’s sponsor has agreed to pay for 50% of all her educational materials (*provided she maintains an 85% average in her course work*) plus pay her a progressive wage throughout her 5-year training period. Schwarz’s sponsor has agreed to pay for all her educational materials plus pay her a progressive wage throughout her 4-year training period. This is one more example of a win – win employment opportunity that hopefully more Montana women will give serious consideration to when making their career decisions.

To learn more visit the Apprenticeship and Training Program website, <http://wsd.dli.mt.gov/apprenticeship/apprentice.asp>, or call (406) 444-3998.